IN THE CLAIMS:

1. (Currently amended) A method for preparing cross-linked cellulosic fibers in sheet form, the method comprising:

(a) treating cellulosic fibers with a caustic solution under non-mercerizing conditions to make caustic treated cellulosic fibers;

(b) forming said caustic treated cellulosic fibers into a sheet;

~~(a)~~ (c) applying a polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent to ~~a~~ said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers~~, said fibers having been treated with caustic solution under non-mercerizing conditions~~; and

~~(b)~~ (d) curing the cross-linking agent on said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers to form a sheet of caustic treated fibers with intrafiber cross-links.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein the hemicellulose content of the cellulosic fibers is greater than 8%.

3. The method of Claim 1, wherein the hemicellulose content of the cellulosic fibers is greater than 10%.

4. The method of Claim 1, wherein the hemicellulose content of the cellulosic fibers is between 8-15%.

5. The method of Claim 1, wherein the sheet produced in step (a) is dried prior to step (b).

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers have been treated with less than 10% caustic solution strength.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers have been treated with less than 8% caustic solution strength.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent comprises a homopolymer of maleic acid monomer, a copolymer of maleic acid monomer, a terpolymer of maleic acid monomer or a mixture thereof.

9. The method of Claim 8, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has an average molecular weight from about 400 to about 10000.

10. The method of Claim 8, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has an average molecular weight from about 400 to about 4000.

11. The method of Claim 8, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has a pH from about 1.5 to about 5.5.

12. The method of Claim 8, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has a pH from about 2.5 to about 3.5.

13. The method of Claim 1, wherein the cross-linking agent comprises a C2-C9 polycarboxylic acid.

14. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbency under load greater than about 8.0 g/g.

15. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbency under load greater than about 9.0 g/g.

16. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbent capacity greater than about 9.0 g/g.

17. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbent capacity greater than about 10.0 g/g.

18. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have a centrifuge retention capacity less than about 0.6 g/g.

19. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have a centrifuge retention capacity less than about 0.55 g/g.

20. (Currently amended) A method of preparing a sheet of cross-linked cellulosic fibers having superior absorbency properties, the method comprising:

(a) treating cellulose fibers with a caustic solution under non-mercerizing conditions to make caustic treated cellulose fibers;

~~(a)~~ (b) forming a wet laid sheet of said caustic treated cellulosic fibers~~,~~ ~~said fibers having been treated with a caustic solution under non-mercerizing conditions~~;

~~(b)~~ (c) applying a polymeric polycarboxylic acid cross-linking agent to said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers to form a sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers impregnated with the cross-linking agent; and

~~(c)~~ (d) curing the cross-linking agent on said impregnated sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers to form intrafiber cross-links.

21. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the impregnated sheet produced in step ~~(b)~~ (c) is dried prior to step ~~(c)~~ (d).

22. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the hemicellulose content of the caustic treated cellulosic fibers is greater than 8%.

23. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the hemicellulose content of the caustic treated cellulosic fibers is greater than 10%.

24. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the hemicellulose content of the caustic treated cellulosic fibers is between 8-15%.

25. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the cellulosic fibers have been treated with less than 10% caustic solution strength.

26. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the cellulosic fibers have been treated with less than 8% caustic solution strength.

27. The method of Claim 20, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent comprises a homopolymer of maleic monomer, a copolymer of maleic acid monomer, a terpolymer of maleic acid monomer, or a mixture thereof.

28. The method of Claim 27, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has an average molecular weight from about 400 to about 4000.

29. The method of Claim 27, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has a pH from about 1.5 to about 5.5.

30. The method of Claim 27, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has a pH from about 2.5 to about 3.5.

31. The method of Claim 20, wherein said cross-linking agent comprises a C2-C9 polycarboxylic acid.

32. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulose fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbency under load greater than about 8.0 g/g.

33. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulose fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbency under load greater than about 9.0 g/g.

34. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulose fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbent capacity greater than about 9.0 g/g.

35. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulose fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbent capacity greater than about 10.0 g/g.

36. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulose fibers with interfiber cross-links have a centrifuge retention capacity less than about 0.6 g/g.

37. (Currently amended) The method of Claim 20, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulose fibers with interfiber cross-links have a centrifuge retention capacity less than about 0.55 g/g.

38. A composition comprising a wet laid sheet of cellulosic fibers, said cellulosic fibers having been treated with a caustic solution under non-mercerizing conditions and having substantial intrafiber cross-linking formed from the application of a polymeric polycarboxylic acid cross-linking agent.

39. The composition of Claim 38, wherein the hemicellulose content of the cellulosic fibers is greater than 8%.

40. The composition of Claim 38, wherein the hemicellulose content of the cellulosic fibers is greater than 10%.

41. The composition of Claim 38, wherein the hemicellulose content of the cellulosic fibers is between 8-15%.

42. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the cellulosic fibers have been treated with less than 10% caustic solution strength.

43. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the cellulosic fibers have been treated with less than 8% caustic solution strength.

44. The composition of Claim 38, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent comprises a homopolymer of maleic acid monomer, a copolymer of maleic acid monomer, a terpolymer of maleic acid monomer, or a mixture thereof.

45. The composition of Claim 44, wherein the polymeric carboyxlic acid cross-linking agent has an average molecular weight from about 400 to about 4000.

46. The composition of Claim 44, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has a pH from about 1.5 to about 5.5.

47. The composition of Claim 44, wherein the polymeric carboxylic acid cross-linking agent has a pH from about 2.5 to about 3.5.

48. The composition of Claim 38, wherein the intrafiber cross-linking of said cellulosic fibers is formed by a cross-linking agent comprised of C2-C9 polycarboxylic acid.

49. – 53. (Cancelled)

54. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein said caustic treated cellulosic fibers are ~~made by wet laying cellulosic fibers in sheet form and cross-linking said fibers~~ cross-linked while they are in said sheet form.

55. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbency under load greater than about 8.0 g/g.

56. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbency under load greater than about 9.0 g/g.

57. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbent capacity greater than about 9.0 g/g.

58. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have an absorbent capacity greater than about 10.0 g/g.

59. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have a centrifuge retention capacity less than about 0.6 g/g.

60. (Currently amended) The composition of Claim 38, wherein the fibers in said sheet of caustic treated cellulosic fibers with interfiber cross-links have a centrifuge retention capacity less than about 0.55 g/g.